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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the value of role play in facilitating children's language development and suggests strategies for using role play effectively in early childhood and intermediate classrooms. Role play requires the child (1) to listen and observe peer talk and action and to use language memory, attention and concentration behaviors; (2) to negotiate the implementation of roles; and (3) to use life experiences in order to act out people and situations. Role play also gives the child an understanding of what people do and say in life situations, encourages communication by body movement and manipulation of puppets, and facilitates language listening, recall of printed materials and retelling of what has been heard. To develop language through role play, teachers can use both classroom and child focused strategies. The classroom should provide an array of materials from which appropriate objects can be selected and materials chosen which can be used in multiple ways. Suggested teacher interventions range from indirect guidance through selective intervention in child initiated role play to direct management of the role play activity. (RH)

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ROLE PLAYING AS AN IMAGINATIVE EXPERIENCE FOR LANGUAGE GROWTH

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Role Playing as an Imaginative Experience

for Language Growth

"You be father," says Juan to Angelo, "and, I will play Uncle Joseph!" Patti says, "I will not be baby again but play mother!" Henry "gets" to be baby and the cast of characters is complete!

The stories and themes role played in thousands of schools change on a daily basis from "Mommies and Daddies" to "Wonder Woman," "Spiderman" or "Becoming Mayor." They depend upon immediate concerns, interests, daily experiences, and age of the child. Although stories and themes vary, role playing is used as an imaginative experience by children in preschool, kindergarten, primary, and middle school. For all children enrolled in early childhood and for many others at the intermediate levels, role playing is easy--it comes natural! Children enjoy the challenges, the feeling of mastery, and the suspense involved. Playing a dragon using cloth, a rider and horse from chairs, and role playing Cinderella and other characters or situations from a "puff of thin air" are powers of imagination that all children have at their finger tips. Knowing that the end of the role play is never fixed but evolves through improvising, children spontaneously act out stories and episodes and communicate in verbal and motor forms.

Although the potential is ever present and arises daily, role playing is seldom used as an imaginative experience and instructional tool for language growth at early childhood and middle school levels (Yawkey, 1978b). The reasons are many! Role play, as an offspring of its parent--play, is often thought of as a "curricular extra"--a frill--having little benefit other than personal or group entertainment or fun (Yawkey, 1978c). Secondly, it is little understood as an imaginative experience and source of language production and use. Thirdly,

many think of role playing as "belongi[illegible]" to the social studies discipline but rarely in the language arts, while others relegate it to recess or with dramatics. Then, too, along with the "return to the basics," perceived "frills" are out--"work" in the three R's is in!

The basic idea is that role playing as an imaginative experience has tremendous potential to facilitate the child's language--to speak clearly, to listen effectively; and to use language fluently. Within the past few years, research studies on role play from imaginative experience perspectives and language growth are mushrooming. With an already existing body of knowledge, the results of research show the relationships among role, imagination, and language development. In turn, the research provides a useful set of role playing strategies and another handle for teachers to use with children at early childhood and intermediate levels.

Importance of Role Play. In general, research results show that imaginative experiences through role play, encourage language. Research says that role play gives children real situations in which to generate, produce, use, and practice communication and language expression. Specifically, role playing helps develop language in six ways. The first way relates to role play characteristics. The child through role play changes himself into people and objects other than himself. Through imaginative uses, the child uses and extends speaking, listening, and practices other language skills (Nicholich, 1975). Imaginative experiences, through role play, require the child to listen and pick up cues, from peers, of what to say and how to say it. The child, in turn, generates language by speaking parts of his role that are related to the ongoing communication of others. Because the child is required to listen and observe what peer group members say and do, language memory and powers of attention and concentration develop and increase. Secondly, role play contributes to language learning by

requiring children to fill in gaps between planning for roles and actually carrying them out (Pulaski, 1971). Improvising is the process the children use to bridge the gaps between planning and following through. Language, in verbal and motor form, is the product which is spontaneously and continuously created and becomes the bridge between planning and doing (Pulaski, 1971). Thirdly, research shows that language bridges another gap created during role play. Imaginative activities in role taking require the children to use their life's experiences to play people and situations (Pulaski, 1971). What the player says and does depends upon past living and learning experiences. Language enables the player to perform the present role even though he has little past experience with the situation. Children draw upon past experiences and use language to bridge experiences that they have and those they need. Language again becomes generated, is used in novel ways, and arises from the demands made on the child in role playing (Pulaski, 1971). Whether gaps for the child occur through improvising or by lack of experiences, role playing as an imaginative experience, encourages language production, generation, and elaboration (Nicholich, 1975; Pulaski, 1971).

Fourth, research shows that role play, as an imaginative experience, provides children with opportunities of playing at life. Playing at life gives children a good understanding of what people do and say in life situations and a social setting in which communication is developed and used (Smilansky, 1968). Children learn to express themselves and resolve conflicts using language in socially appropriate ways, understand themselves as individuals and members of groups, and, enrich their attitudes and beliefs (Yawkey, 1978a, Smilansky, 1968). Research, in addition, shows that children who learn and use language in social contexts are better equipped to handle life patterns in their immediate environments than children who do not use language to play at life situations (Smilansky, 1968). Fifth, research on imaginative experiences using role play, shows language benefits from another perspective. Children involved in imaginative experiences,

communicate with their bodies and/or with puppets (Yawkey, 1978a). Research shows that language is developed and practiced using body and/or puppet actions (Yawkey, 1978a). More importantly, children using body movements and puppet actions develop richer, more descriptive, complex and more abstract language than students who use language without props in teacher supervised discussion (Yawkey, 1978a). In addition, research shows that regardless of the age of the young child, using imaginative experience to develop and extend language is better than not using it (Yawkey, 1978a). Sixth, role playing as an imaginative experience facilitates language listening, recalling what is read, and speaking or retelling what was heard (Yawkey, 1978b). Imaginative experience using role play is an extremely effective tool that aides language retelling, speaking, and memory of communication processes.

Based upon research evidence, role playing is an important tool for language learning and development. Surveying research to show the benefits of role play, as an imaginative experience for language, also gives insight into teacher strategies for role play and its use as an instructional tool.

Useful Role Play Strategies for Language

There are a number of strategies that teachers can use to develop language through role play. The strategies are divided into two large groups. The first group deals with the classroom environment; and, the second focuses directly on the child.

Classroom Strategies. The first group focuses on the environment and asks the teacher to examine the classroom to see whether or not it encourages role play. In examining the classroom environment, there are two strategies that teachers can use to check materials in the classroom. The two strategies examine the potential for role play from a materials' perspective and ask the teacher to check:

- the quantity of choices of materials available to the child for use in role play
- the quality of actions possible in using the materials for role play

The strategies of quantity of choices and quality of actions that children make on the materials provide a base for effective role playing experiences in classrooms.

By checking for quantity of choices, the teacher insures that a large number of choices of role play objects are available in the classroom. In sorting from a quantity of materials, children choose right objects to use in role play. By selecting play materials just right for characters and situations, the potential for encouraging language increases. Choosing from many materials insures a "best possible fit" between player and role. In addition, effective use of the strategy encourages language skills by decision making and problem solving.

The second strategy asks the teacher to check for quality of actions that children can make on the materials. In using the strategy, the teacher checks for and provides materials that are used in more than one way and varied in their physical characteristics. Materials that show flexibility of use and are varied in their physical characteristics have the potential for increasing what children do and say with them. Examples of flexible materials that support varied actions include:

- blocks and boxes
- adult clothing and kitchen utensils
- transportation, people, and animal toy sets
- rice, navy beans, sand, and water

Some examples of physical characteristics of role play objects that encourage varied actions are:

- designs such as checkerboard and striped patterns
- textures, for example, rough, smooth, bumpy, soft, and hard
- forms such as square shaped, rectangular, and circular
- colors, for example, bright primary and secondary colors and hues
- functions, such as, using the same objects as utensils, transportation vehicles, and city buildings

Flexibility in use and variability of physical characteristics increase what children do and say with the materials.

The two strategies used to check the classroom environment form the vary basis of language and thought processes and build communication concepts from concrete to abstract and from simple to complex (Piaget, 1962). The role play strategies for the classroom environment also provide opportunities for children to discuss and talk about materials used in role play in social and work settings. The classroom strategies are proven facilitators of language growth, practice, use, and learning.

Child Strategies. The second large group focuses directly on children and provides a number of useful strategies for role playing and language growth through imaginative experiences. The strategies range from indirect to direct teacher guidance of the children's role play. The first strategy is "indirect guidance." The aim of the teacher is to observe children in role play and intervene at appropriate times. The goal of teacher intervention is to increase and extend the child's imaginative experiences through role play. To use indirect guidance, the teacher first observes the children in role play to get an idea of the story, theme, and roles played, and use of the materials in the episode. After observing, the teacher decides which strategy to use in indirect guidance. The four parts of the indirect guidance strategy are: (1) oral cues; (2) physical characteristics; (3) related; and, (4) unrelated objects (Yawkey, 1978b).

Regardless of which strategy is used, indirect guidance provides children with prompts to expand the depth of role play and uses of language.

In using oral cues, the teacher adds to play objects, situations, and characters as the role play unfolds. The idea is for the children to incorporate the suggestions into their role play activity, thus extending and enriching the imaginative experience and language. Some examples of cuing with play objects are:

- "Show in your play how the cardboard boxes could be used as a bridge!"
- "Pretend the pieces of the puzzle are bumpy roads over which you drive your cars to the circus!"

Some examples of cuing for situations and characters are:

- "After Queen Shirley killed the dragon with her soldiers, she then decides to hold a Tournament in their honor!"
- "Johnny, as you play Uncle Sam, show how pleased you are to be invited on the trip with Shanda's family!"

The second part of the indirect guidance strategy is "physical characteristics." As children continue to use the same materials over again in their play episodes, the teacher changes the physical characteristics of the objects. By selecting and changing some of the physical characteristics of the materials, children's use of language in imaginative experiences increases. Changing physical characteristics increased the complexity of play materials and the children need to use more advanced language and thought to include them in their imaginative episodes. Examples of changing the characteristics of objects include:

- painting checkerboard designs on table or floor blocks with washable paint
- cutting several cardboard pieces of jigsaw into halves
- sewing a short cape to an adult jacket used in dress-up
- painting play refrigerators, electric ranges, and sinks different colors

The purpose for using the strategy is to extend, enrich and increase the children's imaginative and language processes as children include the objects into the episode.

"Related objects" is the third part of indirect guidance. Using the strategy in imaginative situations means adding objects that are physically or functionally related to others in the play episode. In adding related objects to others in the episode, the children incorporate them into their activities. Including new but related materials means that the roles and situations played must be modified and changed in the process. As the children spontaneously alter roles and situations to effectively use the related objects, imagination, language growth and learning are expanded and enriched.

Examples of using the strategy include:

- In imaginative experiences dealing with "astronauts," "spaceships" and "moon landings," the teacher adds a "dune-buggy" and a space monster costume.
- For the imaginative activity, "On the Farm!", other miniature animals and farm objects are added.
- In portraying an experience from "Little House on the Prairie" and other favorite TV shows, the teacher adds a costume for an additional character, "The Preacher."

The fourth part of the indirect guidance strategy is "unrelated objects." Here, the intent is for children to incorporate and use play materials that are unrelated in physical characteristics and function to those being used in the episode.

Some examples of the strategy are:

- adding wooden pegs and bricks during the children's role play of the fairy tale, "Sleeping Beauty."

- adding brown paper bags, toy cars, and trucks to stories such as "Dracula" or "Evil Stepmother"
- including playdough, and perhaps some wood, hammers, and nails to the imaginative experience, "Cowboys"

In adding unrelated objects to others in the episode, children find ways to include and use them in their activity. Extending and using more imagination and language in the episode are outcomes. Problem solving and decision making processes and other language tools are used and practiced.

The second strategy is "exploration." The teacher uses the strategy by giving children time in the classroom schedule to explore school and community environments. By exploring, the pupils' experiences in the world around them become grist from which more complex language and thought arise. As the students explore, they use their senses of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and moving to learn. Exploration, in addition, leads to the growth and use of language concepts such as discovering, predicting, generalizing, and classifying.

Examples of ways teachers use the exploration strategy are:

- observing for changes in the classroom like new bulletin boards, interest centers, pictures postures and others
- visiting rooms in the school that children rarely see to observe materials, people, colors used and their uses
- walking around blocks in the neighborhood close to the school and seeing the varying objects, types of buildings, people, animals, and shapes that make up the student's world
- reliving situations observed using make-believe companions

The third teacher strategy for adding imaginative experiences through role play is "use of objects!" The teacher, in using the strategy, encourages the use of a variety of play materials in imaginative activities. Using a variety of materials generates more language and thought as children try and incorporate

them into individual and group role play (Piaget, 1962). Then, too, by encouraging and making use of greater numbers and varieties of play materials, the language distance between the pupils and the characters played increases. Also, as variety and number of play materials increases, the children "feel" freer to use many other types of language to express ideas. They can safely put more of themselves into the role play through detailed disguises without "showing" themselves or their ideas for peer criticism (Piaget, 1962). Using the strategy means encouraging children to include variety from each of four main categories of objects. The categories and examples follow:

1. Construction materials are open ended, multipurposeful, and basic to imaginative experiences of children. Constructional materials lend themselves to imaginative experiences because they are extremely flexible in use and function. Examples include: (a) large and small table blocks; (b) tinkertoys; (c) slinkies; and, (d) Lincoln or Canadienne logs.

2. Instructional materials are designed by the manufacturer to teach skills and concepts largely taken from school curriculum and used by children in make-believe. Some examples of instructional materials are: (a) puzzles, (b) nesting blocks, (c) cards, checkers, and chess, and games.

3. Real objects, typically found in nature or manufactured for adults, provide another source of variety. They are also flexible in use and encourage imaginative experiences. Some examples are: (a) cardboard boxes from grocery stores; (b) discarded adult clothing; (c) sand, water, dried navy beans and rice; and, (d) wood used with hammer, nails, and saws, and others.

4. Toy materials are miniature replicas of real objects in the world. There are many subgroups of toys and some of them are: (a) transportation toys--such as, miniature cars, trucks, and others which children ride for instance wagons, bikes, scooters, and Big Wheels; (b) animal and people toys, such as, scaled-down versions of horses, dogs, men, and women; and, (c) housekeeping toys, for instance, baby dolls, brooms, cups, and knives.

A fourth strategy is "flexibility." In using the strategy, the teacher observes what the pupils do and say to learn about their immediate interests and concerns. The interests and concerns that the teacher notes, can be turned into imaginative experiences with language by:

- developing them into special role playing experiences
- relating them to favorite stories
- turning them into role play of favorite TV shows
- using them as a basis to predict "what would happen if . . . !" and role playing the prediction

Picking up on the children's immediate ideas and developing them into imaginative experiences facilitate language through practice because the communication that arises is of immediate importance to the students. As the children enact story episodes arising from concerns, role play helps them better understand the problems.

The fifth role playing strategy is "descriptive communication!" In role play, as an imaginative experience, the students are immersed in a sea of words. Words define the children's actions, feelings, and thoughts. In using the descriptive communications strategy, the teacher asks the pupils to tell, express, and show their thoughts and feelings in the role play as clearly as possible. By stressing descriptive language in imaginative experiences, the child learns to communicate and practice words effectively--he or she "learns to make people, situations, and objects real."

Examples of descriptive communication are:

- "The green spotted dragon has two long tails on its round stomach and five horns coming from its square head!", in place of, "The dragon has tails and horns!"
- "It is all red, has two flat sides, can be held with your two fingers, and moved round on a board in a game! What is it?"

- "Bark, bark, I bite with my sharp and pointed teeth!", rather than the more literal, "Bark, bark, I bite!"
- "I jumped down the stairs in one leap and chased after the 'Wicked Stepmother' with a broom!"
- "Watch how I drive real fast down the bumpy and windy road with my car. Beep, beep!"

The strategy helps develop abstract and complex language from literal communication through imaginative experiences through role play.

The sixth role play strategy is "direct management!" In using the strategy, the teacher actually sets up a formal role playing situation, helps select the players, leads follow-up discussions and arranges for re-enactments. What the players say and do, in the imaginative activity, however, evolves and the students improvise from the beginning to ending of the episode. The teacher uses a number of formal steps in the direct management of role play. The formal steps together with a short description are:

1. Building Classroom Climate. Role play as an imaginative experience occurs best when the teacher and children understand one another's expectations and where the teacher is non-threatening. A positive classroom atmosphere contributes to role playing and imaginative experiences because students are free to express feelings that may be opposite of the teacher.

2. Warm-Up. The teacher gives background by reading stories, showing films and sharing incidents that are basic to the role play. As a result of the background, children identify with the characters, become motivated and want to participate.

3. Player Selection. Selecting players for role playing depends upon the pupil's identification with the characters and situations. Students who identify with the role play make better players than those who do not.

4. Staging. After the players are selected, the students, with the teacher's guidance, plan broadly what they are going to do and say in their roles. Dialogues, actions of the players, and end of the episode evolve and only general courses of action are planned.

5. Audience Preparation. The teacher prepares the audience for the imaginative activity, sets-up observing and listening goals but does not ask them to evaluate the players. Preparing the audience contributes to making the observers active.

6. Role Playing. The actual episode unfolds with both players and observers prepared for their important roles.

7. Discussions. Discussion with observer and player follows. It centers on the guides, given by the teacher, for observing and listening to the role play.

8. Other Re-Enactments. Whether or not follow-up role playing episodes are needed depends on the teacher's goals and student's ideas brought out in discussion. The teacher, for example, may want to repeat the role play to reinforce and extend specific concepts learned in the imaginative activity. Using other players in the activity is another goal underlying other re-enactments of the episode.

9. Discussion Where Needed. Discussing the re-enactments helps students enrich language skills and concepts and provides time to re-teach needed concepts. With each additional playback of the activity, discussions help children extend language learning.

10. Generalization. In the last step, the teacher and students share understandings, skills, and attitudes learned from the role playing activity. The teacher, in addition, evaluates the students' learning. Students, with teacher guidance, come to realize that they may share experiences, concerns, and problems with the characters and situations played. Feeling that others share the

experiences helps students work them through. The generalization step helps bring language and social concepts learned in the imaginative experience into focus (KEYTEXT, 1978).

In sum, based upon research findings, role play as an imaginative experience provides a classroom tool for instruction that is very effective in helping children practice, use, develop, and learn language. In using it as an instructional aide, teachers can easily implement strategies to develop role playing in their classrooms. The use of the role play strategies that focus on the classroom environment and the child are unlimited and can be used efficiently and effectively to increase language concepts and skills.

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